

STUDENT SATISFACTION: EXPLORING THE DISCONFIRMATION FRAMEWORK IN A HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

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Declining enrollments, decreased funding, and increased demands have compelled most institutions of higher education to consider marketing practices and research more seriously. However, most market research in higher education has focused on the prospective student and recruitment activities. Evaluation of student satisfaction has been a relatively neglected topic. Our study explored student expectations and satisfaction. The disconfirmation framework of consumer satisfaction was tested as an appropriate approach for studying satisfaction in higher education. The degree chosen for review was the Masters in Business Administration. Early models of consumer behavior established the importance of consumer satisfaction proposing that it resulted from a consumer's subjective comparison of "expected" and "received" product attributes. This original perspective was significantly altered by including a disconfirmation construct. The new perspective suggested that a consumer's expectations of a product's attributes or performance can be either confirmed or disconfirmed through product usage. As a result of this experience, a consumer develops a situation specific feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Disconfirmation serves as an intervening variable. Although it has been demonstrated that the disconfirmation experience can be a more important force than expectations in consumer satisfaction, the need to include the disconfirmation construct as an intervening variable has not been supported in all cases. There is a need to continue investigation of the disconfirmation framework across different products and contexts. Higher education is a complex "service" product and an interesting consumption context in which to explore the disconfirmation perspective. Stated in alternative form, our hypotheses were:

- H1: Disconfirmations will have greater impact on student satisfaction than expectations will.
- H2: The level of student satisfaction will be directly correlated with the direction and magnitude of encountered disconfirmations.
- H3: Students with low expectations who experienced positive disconfirmations will have significantly higher levels of satisfaction than students who had high expectations and experienced confirmations or negative disconfirmations.

Our study was conducted at a large public university during a recent spring semester. Samples of prospective (n=91) and currently enrolled (n=171) students were included. In the development of our questionnaire, a list of potentially important program elements was generated and pretested. Six elements proved most relevant: quality of instruction; coursework/degree requirements; class size; graduate advising services; career opportunities; and career services. These were included on the final questionnaires. Student expectations and disconfirmations were measured through self-administration of the questionnaires.

As in previous studies, Likert scales were used to assess expectation components for the program elements. A certainty of expectations measure was included to help determine how strongly an expectation was held. Disconfirmation as a subjective comparison of actual outcomes to expected probabilities was operationalized on a "better-and-worse-than-expected scale." The satisfaction construct was measured using a multi-item

semantic differential scale. Satisfaction was assessed for: the choice to pursue an MBA degree; the MBA program itself; and the university. Reliability scores for satisfaction were calculated. Hypothesis (H1) stated that disconfirmations would have greater impact on satisfaction than expectations. Multiple regression was used to analyze how expectations, certainty of expectations, and disconfirmations influenced satisfaction. For overall satisfaction with the university, H1 was clearly supported. For all program elements, disconfirmation made a greater contribution to satisfaction than expectations. Certainty of expectations was also positively correlated with university satisfaction for all variables. Results for the dimension, choice to pursue the degree, also indicated that disconfirmations contribute more to satisfaction than expectations. However three of the independent variables did not make a significant contribution. Only certainty about the quality of instruction and degree requirements contributed significantly. Certainty about advice was negatively related. For satisfaction with the program, only two of the program elements produced a significant relationship: quality of instruction and coursework/degree requirements.

Hypothesis (H2) tested whether students' satisfaction was directly correlated with disconfirmations. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated and supported this with no significant exceptions. Regression analysis was conducted to confirm the direction and relative impact of each element on satisfaction. Beta coefficients for all disconfirmation variables were positive as hypothesized, but the level of significance varied. The highest proportion of significant relationships occurred with the program satisfaction dimension.

Analysis of covariance was used to test H3 which hypothesized that satisfaction would be greater for students who had low expectations and then experienced positive disconfirmations. This hypothesis was supported when controlling for positive disconfirmation only for the quality of instruction and degree requirements/coursework elements.

Overall results were consistent with prior research. Expectations and disconfirmations directly influenced students' satisfaction. Expectations had less impact than disconfirmations, and satisfaction was directly correlated with the disconfirmations encountered. For variables that were important, satisfaction was found to be greater for students with low expectations who experienced positive disconfirmations.

In this study, an elementary operationalization of the disconfirmation framework was enacted. Results suggest that more comprehensive designs and more sophisticated analytical techniques are appropriate in future studies in educational contexts. Moreover, the theoretical perspective and general methods explored in this study could be adapted to design and conduct practical evaluative research studies or to establish an evaluation process in which students' expectations and relative satisfaction levels could be assessed and monitored across programs, services and time. The theoretical bases of the disconfirmation perspective can offer interesting insights guiding strategic analysis, resource allocations and marketing action in higher education contexts.